

Newspaper:

Providence Journal

Date:

June 22, 2007

More than 'more money'

R.I. needs new school-finance system

DANIEL J. MCKEE

IN CRISIS, it is wise to cling fast to our bedrock principles. Public education in Rhode Island is in crisis. The principle we must now rely on and defend is this: Our schools belong to students, families and all citizens who in good faith provide the funds to operate them. If we embrace this belief perhaps we will awaken to our great responsibility.

When a child comes home with four F's and three D's on his report card, responsible parents understand the urgency, rethink that child's needs without prejudice and, with excellent professional advice, form a plan of action.

What do good citizens do when Rhode Island education receives four F's and three D's? ("More F's for Rhode Island," Journal, March 7).

In the U.S. Chamber of Commerce study "Leaders and Laggards," it is reported that the performance of only one New England state is dismal: Rhode Island, which ranks 16th from the bottom, despite consistently finishing near the top in taxpayer spending per student. So far, the response to these failing grades is not promising.

A number of reports have been commissioned and published: The Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council's 2007 report, "Funding Our Future: An Approach to Fund Education in Rhode Island"; the 2006 teacher unions' report, "The Shape of the Starting Line: A Policy Review on Improving Education in Rhode Island"; and the 2007 "State of Rhode Island Education Adequacy Study" commissioned by the General Assembly's Joint Committee to Establish a Permanent Education Foundation Aid Formula. All of these reports are the result of well-intentioned people working very hard. All of them contain valuable information. None of them, however, offers any hope.

Relying on shop-worn themes, such as the need to adjust the state funding formula and to find additional resources for special-needs students and English-language learners, the reports' authors fail to see these needs as symp-

toms of a greater problem, and fail to ask the hard questions necessary to spark change.

What is striking is that people operating in good faith can nonetheless offer us the disingenuous "solution" of additional funding when they themselves surely must know that no additional funding of any consequence is forthcoming from the state and no more money can be raised through local property taxes.

Rhode Island government is now running about \$1 million in the red each day. Yet, amazingly, all of the reports recommend fixing the current system by spending more money, and none identify the source of additional funds.

The General Assembly's intentions to freeze state education aid is very telling when you consider that finding \$20 million in the state's \$7 billion budget is like finding a mere \$20,000 in a municipal budget of \$70 million. There is no municipality in the state that could not adjust its budgets, without raising taxes, to fund a program that cost less than one half of one percent if they deemed it worth funding.

What is disappointing is that there has not been a well-reasoned debate about a solution that would both contain the rising costs of education and raise the performance of our students.

We have reached the moment when even the teachers unions' report acknowledges that "the costs are high and performance seems low for the investment." Rhode Island needs to start looking at public education through a different set of eyes and start challenging the popular thought centered on the wishful thinking that the current financial model can be fixed.

Until we start asking what the 21st Century learning network would look like if we started it from scratch, we will continue to embrace the below-average results that status-quo thinking produces.

To date, Rhode Islanders have simply settled into our old camps: On the one hand are those who want to halt investment in public education, re-

gardless of the social cost, and on the other those who want to increase investment in public education regardless of the economic cost. As mayors, or municipal CEOs, we understand that social costs are economic costs, and vice versa.

This is the reason we can no longer sit on our hands. It is not too drastic a statement to say that Rhode Island sinks or swims on this issue. In good conscience, municipal CEOs cannot and will not wait any longer to weigh in on this issue.

The Coalition of Communities Improving Rhode Island is led by mayors, administrators and community leaders who represent hundreds of thousands of taxpayers who need property-tax relief. These communities can no longer afford to support public education in its current form.

Over the next six months the Coalition will raise the funds and commission a first-class research team to produce a report that will represent a municipal leader's perspective on what needs to be done to address the crisis that our communities and Rhode Island face. The completed report will be ready for presentation at the 2008 General Assembly session.

The time is right for a new report, a Municipal Leaders Report, which makes recommendations to create policies that contain educational costs and improve student performance. Citizens are ready. The General Assembly is listening. Change is inevitable. The only question is whether, in the context of the global marketplace, Rhode Islanders will be its agents and beneficiaries, or its victims. The only way we can find the right answers is to begin asking the right questions.

Daniel J. McKee, mayor of Cumberland, wrote this on behalf of the Coalition of Communities Improving Rhode Island. Other contributors to this column are Johnston Mayor Joseph M. Polisena, Warwick Mayor Scott Avedisian, Cranston Mayor Michael Napolitano and Lincoln Town Administrator Joseph Almond.